

It was a solemn young man who brought his youth to a close by so early a marriage. Somewhere, at Groton or Cambridge or Great Stambidge—it is impossible to say where—John Winthrop had caught a fever more lingering than the one that took away his comforts in college. He had caught the fever of Puritanism.

Superficially Puritanism was only a belief that the Church of England should be purged of its hierarchy and of the traditions and ceremonies inherited from Rome. But those who had caught the fever knew that Puritanism demanded more of the individual than it did of the church. Once it took possession of a man, it was seldom shaken off and would shape—some people would say warp—his whole life. Puritanism was a power not to be denied. It did great things for England and for America, but only by creating in the men and women it affected a tension which was at best painful and at worst unbearable. Puritanism required that a man devote his life to seeking salvation but told him he was helpless to do anything but evil. Puritanism required that he rest his whole hope in Christ but taught him that Christ would utterly reject him unless before he was born God had foreordained his salvation. Puritanism required that man refrain from sin but told him he would sin anyhow. Puritanism required that he reform the world in the image of God's holy kingdom but taught him that the evil of the world was incurable and inevitable. Puritanism required that he work to the best of his ability at whatever task was set before him and partake of the good things that God had filled the world with, but told him he must enjoy his work and his pleasures only, as it were, absentmindedly, with his attention fixed on God.

These paradoxical, not to say contradictory, requirements affected different people in different ways. Some lived in an agony of uncertainty, wondering each day whether God had singled them out for eternal glory or

eternal torment. Some enjoyed a holy certainty and went their indomitable ways with never a look backward. Some spent their lives demonstrating to themselves and everyone else how holy they were. All labored hard, and some by so doing amassed great wealth or won fame among their fellow men—but never dared enjoy it.

Puritanism meant many things. But to young John Winthrop it principally meant the problem of living in this world without taking his mind off God. It would have been easier to withdraw from the world, as the monks and hermits did, to devote oneself wholly to God, but that was not permitted. Puritans must live in the world, not leave it. For a time Winthrop thought he would study divinity and enter the ministry. In that profession he might at least have been freed from the distractions of ordinary business in order to concentrate his attention on God. But his friends dissuaded him, and anyway it was not so much his business as his pleasures that laid snares for him. He was a countryman of simple tastes who liked good food, good drink, and good company. He liked his wife. He liked to stroll by the river with a fowling piece and have a go at the birds. He liked to smoke a pipe. He liked to tinker with gadgets. He liked all the things that God had given him, and he knew it was right to like them, because they were God-given. But how was one to keep from liking them too much? How love the world with moderation and God without?

After his marriage he tried one way after another to keep his exuberant worldly spirit within bounds and gradually denied himself many of the things that he liked most. He resolved, as he noted in a sporadic record he kept of his religious experiences, to give up his tinkering "and to content my selfe with such things as were left by our forefathers." He resolved to give up shooting, after a prolonged and revealing argument with himself. For one

Edmund S. Morgan. The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop.  
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